

Searching For One Thousand Children...

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By Hadar Avraham

Iris Posner is looking for some children, 1154 children, to be exact. That figure, according to Posner, a social science researcher, and Lenore Moskowitz, also a researcher, accurately reflects how many Jewish children were parted from their parents and brought to the United States during World War II to escape Nazi persecution. The overwhelming majority of these children, aged 1-16, never saw their parents again. Records show that 1,500,000 children did not survive the Holocaust.

Posner's interest in this little-researched subject was piqued last year after seeing the Academy Award winning documentary, "Into the Arms of Strangers" (director Mark Jonathan Harris) which delved into the histories of 10,000 Jewish children who, through the Kindertransport, found sanctuary in Britain. "As an American Jew, I was interested to know America's response," says Posner from her home in Maryland.

Her initial forays took her to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum where she soon realized just how little information was available. As a result, One Thousand Children (www.onethousandchildren.org) was created by Posner and Moskowitz with the distinct aim of collecting the names of all the children. Their research led them to New York to the YIVO Institute, the Joint Distribution Committee and the Leo Baeck Institute and slowly, the pieces of the puzzle began to fit together. "We found lists of children that were prepared by different organizations according to name, date of birth, city of arrival and ship they arrived on," says Posner. She adds that there are also medical records extant, drawn up when the children arrived.

As for comprehensive research, there has been only one study, "Unfulfilled Promise" (Denali Press), by Judith Baumel, whose sister and brother were among the arrivals. As an aside, Posner mentions that the publisher in Alaska who agreed to back Baumel's book was Alan Schorr, Posner's childhood friend from the Bronx.

OTC's (One Thousand Children's) mission is twofold, says Posner: "To identify something as important as this in our American history records which is missing, and to honor the lives of individuals and the organizations which received them."

Presently, OTC, in cooperation with the Red Cross and Shoah, has located 200 children and is in contact with 100. The facts emerging are spellbinding. As early as 1933, the German Children's Aid met with Jewish organizations such as HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), JDC, AJC (American Jewish Congress) and National Council of Jewish Women to prepare the groundwork for rescuing the children.

A shroud of secrecy was the necessary response to America's unwillingness to accept foreigners into the U.S. based upon economic, political, social and religious factors. "The first group arrived in November 1934 and landed in New York," says Posner. "They came in very small groups, from just one up to a dozen, at the rate of about 100 a year over 10 years. To avoid publicity, they disembarked the ships without any press coverage and were taken to foster families."

She explains that the foster families had to commit to care for the children until they reached 21 years of age and not to let them become wards of state. "Each child was assigned a social worker from the Jewish social service agency until age 21. Some social workers acted as a surrogate parent." Posner relates how one child endured eight families before finding one where she felt at home. The girl would sneak out at night with her suitcase and wait at the steps of the social worker's building.

Posner is full of admiration for the escorts on the transatlantic crossings. "These women were amazing. Some went back and forth under dangerous circumstances while spending extensive time away from their families."

The process of locating and contacting the children is being undertaken "with some urgency," says Posner, since most are in their 70s or 80s. After locating an individual, the organization strives to include the person in the growing OTC family. "We're like a go-between, to help them communicate with each other. They want so much to be able to do this." While working against the clock, OTC still accords the children an inordinate level of confidentiality. "We don't give names out. We request permission to provide information and then we contact others, giving the option to make the connection." In most instances, people request to be reunited with others from the same ship.

The experience of working with these people is the greatest reward for Posner, even as she says that OTC "has taken over my life, my dining room and my bank account." "They are wonderful people and such a joy to talk to. We don't find any bitterness, just an anxiousness to share their experiences." She was amazed to learn that many of the children were not even aware they were part of the "underground railway." "Many came when they were very young so they have no personal memories. They also lost contact with their shipmates and there may have been no communication with their relatives in Europe. They just don't know how they arrived here and this is a reason why we're doing our work."

Among the harrowing memories Posner was privileged to share was that of a young girl whose brother was destined to sail. "He was sobbing and refused to go, so the next morning the mother managed to send the daughter in his place. She told the nine-year-old child that she was going to camp." Both the mother and son later perished in the concentration camp.

Posner speaks plainly of the deep psychological effects of tearing children away from their parents at such a tender age. "I asked one man, who came when he was seven and now has three children of his own, how he'd been affected and he replied, 'I just could never play with my own children.'"

Besides tracking down the children and filling in the gaps in their personal memoirs, OTC sees its task as enhancing public awareness. For this purpose, there are plans to produce a documentary and to publish literature about the period. Not surprisingly, financing is a major obstacle. "We now have tax exempt status so we can take donations," says Posner, but she adds that costly access to some organizations makes the going tough. "It can be quite expensive to reproduce documents and this may make a documentary prohibitive. How can a repository where people have donated documents for public knowledge become a barrier to getting the word out?" she wonders, a tinge of disapproval in her voice.

In direct contrast, she raves about the volunteers who have offered their services to OTC, including translating German documents and providing legal counsel. "Even the second generation is becoming involved," she says. "One child will become our East Coast coordinator."

OTC hopes to hold an official reunion of OTC survivors, possibly as early as next year but in the interim, an evening will be held on April 18 at the Moses Montefiore Congregation in Baltimore. Rabbi Elan Adler will host the program to mark the first

public recognition of the children and five OTC children will give testimony of their experiences. For details call (410) 653-7485.

(Note: This article may be reprinted with credit to the author Hadar Avraham and the Jewish Press).